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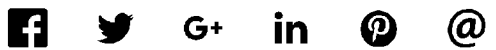
TOPICAL

Slow progress frustrates water quality advocates

By Grant D. Crawford gcrawford@tahlequahdailypress.com 7 hrs ago



The Town Branch Creek in Tahlequah is just one of the many streams for which Save the Illinois River Inc. advocates protection.



A number of local environmental advocates are becoming frustrated by the lack of progress on improving the Illinois River's water quality, and are describing the situation as "in a state of limbo."

Ed Brocksmith, secretary-treasurer for Save the Illinois River Inc., said water quality supporters fear their efforts are stalled.

"There are just so many things that are important to our watershed that are just stalled - the federal court lawsuit, the TMDL that the EPA is working on, changes in the Oklahoma water quality standards that are possible now," said Brocksmith.

The lawsuit to which Brocksmith refers was initiated in 2005, when former Oklahoma Attorney General Drew Edmondson filed it in federal court in an attempt to prohibit the spread of chicken waste in the Illinois River Basin.

"Why hasn't there been a ruling on the federal court lawsuit?" asked Brocksmith. "It's always been my opinion - and I have nothing to base this on - that the judge in the federal court lawsuit made a deal with the poultry companies. If they would clean up their act and do some things to mitigate the damage they were causing to the watershed, he would not issue a ruling and give them time to clean up their act.

U.S. District Court Judge Gregory K. Frizzle, who presided over the case, declined to comment on it Tuesday.

While Brocksmith would like to get a ruling on the lawsuit, he did say improvements to water quality have been made by the poultry farms. That doesn't mean he's content with the river's condition, though, as he said the TMDL (total maximum daily load) for phosphorus limit, 0.037 mg/L, at the state line is violated more than 90 percent of the time.

"Downstream in Tahlequah, it's exceeded around 78 percent of the time," said Brocksmith. "So it still is over and above the limit, even in our own state."

At the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry, Jeremy Seiger, director of Agricultural Environmental Management Services Division, said the poultry industry has taken measures to prevent the pollution of the Illinois River, and that's there a series of requirements each poultry farm must adhere to.

"There have been rules in place for a number of years now that require every poultry-feeding operation to have a nutrient management plan," said Seiger. "Anyone who raises poultry in Oklahoma has specific guidelines designated for the application of nutrients to crops. We review every plan that's written and they're required to keep records."

Brocksmith said he's happy to see the poultry farms making some effort to remove pollution from the Illinois River watershed.

"But where is the waste going?" he asked.

"In Arkansas, reports have to be made about the amount of litter produced and where it's going," said Brocksmith. "In Oklahoma, the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture and they make annual reports, but the reports don't say where the waste is going. Is it going to the Grand River Watershed? If that's the case, one of our most important bodies of water, Grand Lake, is being polluted."

STIR also hopes the Environmental Protection Agency will come to a firm decision on a TMDL - total maximum daily load - for the Illinois River. Environmental regulators released a model for one in 2015, but without action from the EPA, Brocksmith said all progress has come to a standstill.

"The Supreme Court said that under the Clean Water Act, downstream state's water quality standards have to be met by upstream states," said Brocksmith. "It's a matter of enforcing them and no one wants to do anything until the EPA completes the TMDL, which it was required to do decades ago and didn't. Until we have a TMDL that comes from the EPA and is approved by the state, we're not going to get anywhere."

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